

Electronic Correspondence on and about Pietro Grossi. A portrait

Marcella Chelotti Grossi, Marco Ligabue

Florence, 10/3, 2003

Dear Marcella,

I met Pietro the first time in a corridor of the Conservatory of Florence in 1982. I was a young student and saw a notice about the course on musical informatics. I inquired and rushed over; my curiosity was so great. I didn't know that what I'd find out would change my life.

He was walking slowly with that distracted air of his. Actually as I discovered later, his head was full of ideas and projects. His thumbs hooked on the suspenders of a pair of trousers cinched up by a belt, the happy air of a dreamer.

«Remember a day will come when the computer will ask what should be done with mankind», one of the first things he said during the course: «Either very good or very bad», I said to myself. Very good, it couldn't have been better than this; after a few months work a new world began to open up, unexpected and, for me, marvellous. But beyond the contact with technology, with the immense new possibilities for music, then absolutely pioneering, there was the amazement, the sense of amazement that filled Pietro before these things and his absolute ability to communicate to us. From a young age I was an avid reader of adventure stories and science fiction, so to an extent it's a weakness of mine, but every time I left the lessons dreaming, tired (because we worked like madmen) but dreaming and full of a limitless desire to do something. Years of work and friendship did the rest. I found my way and here I am, for what it's worth.

I try to imagine what he could be like outside the context of work, in a more intimate and familiar context, but I have to confess that it's difficult. After all he did set up the first electronic music studio, the S2FM, in your sitting room and it stayed there for a long time, until he gave it to the Conservatory in 1965 to begin the first course of electronic music in Italy. And you certainly couldn't say it was a small amount of stuff! You must have had a lot of patience. Knowing him I suppose he went straight from the kitchen, to the studio, to the cello, to the laboratory, to sleeping; to the children, and so forth. It must have been fascinating, but also difficult to share his life, though I imagine you did it with great ease and simplicity.

Warm regards. See you soon,
Marco

Florence, 10/7, 2003

Dear Marco,

Your letter reminds me of my husband when he first started working on the computer. He made discoveries daily, the potential of the instrument seemed even more extraordinary to him. That's the reason for the shocking phrase! Pietro loved paradoxical ideas. But, I wonder, were they paradoxes or flashes of a mind that saw far into the future in an instant.

I'm delighted to hear how important it was for you to have studied with him and I'm grateful for the memory you cherish. I must say that, severe teacher that he was, who made his students work hard, he knew how to teach them, perhaps by example more than words, that life is a gift to exploit to the hilt and he also passed on some of his optimism. And many of them, I'm also speaking of the cellists, because his activity as a teacher was far-reaching, responded with great affection, aware of having really had a maestro.

What was Pietro like at home – you ask? A complete foreigner to anything practical; he did participate though in family life. He adored his children and grandchildren; he was always concerned about them and proud of their successes. Our 56-year marriage was so intense and interesting I was never aware of having to face any difficulty so his projects could be fulfilled. I offered to relieve of any bureaucratic problems so he could dedicate himself to his work, well compensated by the fact that not a day passed that we didn't talk about fascinating things, often way into the night, because he included me in the whirlwind of his imagination. There were traces of his presence all over the house: instruments, papers, pictures, walls full of nails he hung new pictures on just about every week. Joking I told him that, if the computer was a 'pervasive' instrument (as he always declared,) he was invasive. The kitchen was the only place he rarely visited. He only knew where to find the coffee machine.

Dear Marco, perhaps I've bored you.

Warm regards,

Marcella

Florence, 10/18, 2003

Dear Marcella,

You're not boring me at all; indeed the images you sent me inspire other memories and questions. After Pietro founded S2FM, a lot of people passed through there, from various walks of life: scholars, artists, musicians, physicists, mathematicians and others, there was enormous interest – it was the early 60s – and, considering what remained later, the results were really impressive in quality and quantity. But, for me, aesthetic and theoretical reflection on music developed in this context was an aspect no less secondary and still not yet well researched. I'm thinking of ideas on the abolition of intellectual property, the possibility of using any sound as material for later elaboration and creation and so forth. All things we find ourselves using today without thinking, that prove that those intuitions and problems were right. I think the discussions about them were quite intense, considering both the importance of the problems

faced and the quality of those who participated in S2FM – many of whom shaped and influenced Italian cultural life in a significant way in a variety of fields. Do you remember about this? Is there someone or some situation you remember particularly? I'm jumping from one thing to another. You're giving me the impetus when you talk of the help you gave him to work on his projects. After S2FM when all electronic instruments were given to the Conservatory of Florence, Pietro began to get interested in the computer with the idea of using it for music. He didn't care about those who thought him crazy – seriously – first he went to Olivetti at Pregnana Milanese, then to CNUCE (then the National University Centre of Electronic Computing) of CNR of Pisa to follow his hunches. Then to make sounds on a computer you had to use punch cards, one for each instruction. They had to be punched in specific points and then loaded in the machine in packets, i.e. blocks of various lengths. If you made a single mistake, the whole packet had to be redone. An exhausting job just to produce a few notes and very time consuming. At that time the computers of large data centres like Pisa didn't work around the clock like they did later. They shut down on Saturday and Sunday. So Pietro had to have himself locked in over the weekend and worked as long as he could with a cot to sleep on and whatever you made him to eat. To telling it today sounds like something out of a film; but if you think of the results that all this achieved a short while – the construction of the first computer dedicated to music, the TAU2, built at the IEI institute at CNR, using the TAUMUS software written at CNUCE, for example, along with all the experimentation connected to it – I think I could do a film. When I've told someone about all this, I've seen a gleam in their eyes, especially in young people, from a feeling of affinity for or perhaps fellowship with that spirit and sense of adventure before amazement. Pietro was always young at heart and remained so to the end. He always knew how to maintain that freshness regardless of the many difficulties. And that enthusiasm.

Warm regards,
Marco

Florence, 10/27, 2003

Dear Marco,

Your letter takes me back years. My memory is a little confused, because quite a few people came to our house when S2FM was in Via Capodimondo. Not just Italian young people, also foreigners, especially Americans. I don't recall their names. I remember only one clearly – John Phetteplace, a musician and good graphics artist – because he worked a long time at the studio, continued to correspond with my husband and wanted to meet him during his last trip to Italy when he was already quite ill. I have one of his works that he gave us during his last visit. Among the Italians I recall the regular presence of Albert Mayr, active in those radical experiments and witness to that theorising you refer to in your letter. A beautiful friendship was born between them.

Enore Zaffiri also came to our house and always took a lively interest in Pietro's work deciding to follow a similar path by creating a studio at home that he generously

donated to the Conservatory of Turin. Teresa Rampazzi did the same in Padua. Three great friends, three generous souls, three people who lived for their work, without competing, happy only to exchange news about the projects they were working on. Vittorio Gelmetti was among the other visitors to the studio when it was still at our house. There's a final name I want to mention, Katty La Rocca, who later became a famous visual artist. I mention her because I know she has given credit to the experiences with electronic music; but I don't quite remember if, when I knew her, she worked at my house or already at the Conservatory.

When S2FM was in via Capodimondo my duty was to smile at all our neighbours in the apartment building who had to put up with sounds, sometimes quite loud, day and night. Perhaps out of a certain respectful awe for my husband (he never showed up at a building meeting), no one ever protested.

When all of the equipment was transferred to the Conservatory and the course (which later became a chair) in electronic music was created, I thought Pietro had reached his goal because what he'd believed in had become an official reality. It wasn't like that. In fact, having reached his objective set him off on a new adventure, the stages of which you remember in your letter. But perhaps you don't know how it started. Someone told him that by standing with a radio outside the data processing centre at the Banca Toscana you could pick up the sounds coming out of the main frame. It was like he'd been struck by lightning! Once he'd experienced this he began to pursue informatics with the obstinate will so beautifully conveyed by the anagram of his name.

Affectionately,
Marcella

Florence, 11/12, 2003

Dear Marcella,

The episode at the Banca Toscana you mention is definitely significant, more than significant, because – beyond the fact that it ought to be inserted in the hypothetical film I'd make if I were able – it captures in an image the innate characteristics of a lively spirit. *Goro persisti*, one of the many anagrams Pietro created from his name. This anagram is perhaps the one that best fits his capacity to pursue tenaciously his intuitions, even the most improbable. I can only imagine what the bank employees thought seeing this strange person wandering around the building with a small radio in his hand, capturing the frequencies generated by the computer, and transforming them into sounds! And who knows what they would think today if they knew the first computer based applications for music, computer music, informatics and musical telematics and all those experiments that today seem so normal, even obvious, like downloading music from the Internet, were created in Italy from that weirdness. Because, in fact, Pietro wasn't happy – if that makes much sense applied to him – just to have built the first Italian musical computer, the TAU2. He also worked on other music computers, collaborated with other CNR research centres, like IEI and IROE, experimented with the first attempts at voice synthesis – amusing himself 'profaning'

Leopardi's poem *L'infinito* by having the machine recite it, as he'd done earlier with Bach attracting the barbs of those purists who in light the situation now evidently understood little. He was the first ever to experiment with telematic music. And all this interspersed, or better yet alternating so closely as to be almost continuous, with intense composing, first instrumental, then electronic and later computerised. Later the decision to abandon composing – after succeeding in the early 80's in creating the first Italian chair of musical informatics at the 'Cherubini' Conservatory of Florence – to dedicate himself gradually to computer graphics and to conceptualise finally «*Home art*, art created by and for itself, extemporaneous ephemera, free from the judgement of others», something that assumes the look of a real Copernican revolution in the world of aesthetics.

I remember with nostalgia, and I am sure that I am not the only one, evenings at the Grossi's: the invitation arrived – always a *home art* image –, friends met, participated in the presentations of various artists invited to share their work and experiences, ate – your marvellous food! – talked, argued, and exchanged opinions. Something that seemed almost like something from another time and instead was and is so near to us and fixed on the present. I still preserve so many images, sounds, memories. Who knows how many you do.

Until the next,

Marco

Florence, 11/23, 2003

Dear Marco,

I am delighted to hear that the evenings in Via Capodimondo are pleasant memories for you: It was Pietro's idea and I agreed enthusiastically. His task was to do the program, create, and send out the invitations, very original without a doubt (it's too bad I never collected them). My much more banal task was to feed the guests on more than art. Of the artistic friends who generously participated, I'll never forget Enore Zaffiri who came from Turin one evening to share his work.

Since many events and experiences are crowding in my mind like yours, this morning I decided to dive back into the 60's by going to see the show on Fiamma Vigo and the *Numero* Gallery at the State Archives. It is a splendid show, richly documented on the work of many foreign artists, too, well organized, and with an excellent catalogue. I was very interested.

I remember that my husband turned to Vigo when he wanted to put on small exhibitions of painters who were part of *Numero* in the atrium of the Conservatory for the "Vita Musicale Contemporanea" concerts. Evidently he wanted to underscore the interdisciplinary nature of the debate going on in Florence in those years (I won't say anything about the attitudes of the music and art critics at the time).

Intense years, the 60's, years my husband remembered with nostalgia.

And since we are on a wave of nostalgia, the telematics you referred to in your letter reminded me of Rimini in the 70's, when Pietro carried out his first experiment on musical telematics by connecting to the CNUCE in Pisa: an interested, cordial Dino

Buzzati sat next to him and wanted to try to transmit sounds. Out of that came one of his beautiful articles in the «Corriere della Sera».

Dear Marco, I feel like I've photographed my confused memory reliving the many lives of Pigo.

Affectionately,

Marcella

Florence, 12/11, 2003

Dear Marcella,

I hope you'll be happy when I say that I have saved (jealously) almost all the invitations and I don't think I'm alone. Who knows if by asking around among friends we might not put them all together? As far as the 'banality' of feeding the guests, I think you frankly are the only one to think that.

In particular you touch on another very significant aspect of Pietro's life: his untiring activity as a promoter new music. In fact, from 1961 to 1967 "Vita Musicale Contemporanea" was – not only as an association in which prestigious names of Florentine cultural life of the time figured – one of the venues that brought the best of both electric and instrumental world contemporary music to Italy: Dallapiccola, Stockhausen, Rzewski, Session, Varèse, Foss, Cage, Koenig, Vlad, Nono, Davidowski, Gelmetti, Ligeti, Berio, Maderna, Kagel, Bussotti, Chiari, Castiglioni, Manzoni, Bucci, Barraqué, Ferrari, Malec, Parmegiani, Rampazzi, Mayr, Bayle, and many, many others whom I don't remember now (and please excuse me for that). In addition to all of the conferences – the first Convegno Internazionale dei Centri Sperimentali di Musica Elettronica per il XXXI Maggio Musicale fiorentino (International Conference of Experimental Centres for Electronic Music for the XXXI Maggio Musicale Fiorentino): at the Teatro Comunale there are those who still remember the equipment Pietro had to have brought in by a window because there was no way to get it through the door or by the stairs (or so it seems, fact or fiction?) – the meetings, discussions, exhibits of visual artists, projections of unedited films with original electronic sound tracks, the reviews on the productions of electronic music studios operating then, the first performances. And with what variety, pluralism, taste for interdisciplinary and cultural exchange – from Bruno Munari to Toraldo di Francia, just to cite only two of the many who were friends and involved. Leafing through the programs, if we compare the activity of that time with what is happening today, it almost makes you feel badly; but I believe that it's best to follow their example and try to make things happen again. «Ok, let's see, where should we start from to move this world forward?» Certainly better than constant complaining about everything and everyone, which leads nowhere. There have always been 'difficulties' (with three fs); so we might as well roll up our sleeves. I believe this is the best way to receive this inheritance and recognise the job done: to carry it forward.

And Pietro didn't ask for anything. Nothing for himself, no recognition or the like, he never sought after anything of the sort, never even thought of it. He only thought of working 'like a madman'. I think this was one of the things I admired most about

him and hope left a profound mark on me. I don't know yet if I've developed this capacity; the years to come will tell. Then I think how much he left us intellectually and concretely. We'll need more time to measure what and how much. A job to do. Maybe we're already doing a little bit with our letters.

Affectionately,

Marco

Florence, 12/7, 2003

Dear Marco,

I am happy to know you've kept the invitations of our evening get-togethers. I'll take advantage of your kindness to make copies. Aside from their pleasant, convivial nature, those meetings were micro-models of what public organizations could do: to provide information on what is happening in the arts, to stir up debate etc. Unfortunately, the financing (little) for culture is often destined for projects managed by 'lip service'. As a good Florentine who adores her city this irritates me and seems to be a betrayal of the lessons of the Renaissance and, thus, its history.

I'll stop this preaching tone right now (40 years of teaching have not passed in vain) and come to "Vita Musicale Contemporanea". I was moved to hear how you understood the cultural significance of that initiative of Pietro's even though you didn't live through those years. Among other things it was an occasion to collect an amount of musical documentation I feel deserves more attention. Naturally I would be quite happy to make it available for consultation and also for eventual performance. There are a number of sheets, tapes, and records. In my opinion it's a patrimony that shouldn't be ignored.

Still on the topic of "Vita Musicale Contemporanea" I wanted to tell you something you might not know but that I would like you to know, given that you've preserved such a vivid memory of my husband. There isn't one work of his among the "Vita Musicale Contemporanea" programs. As the organiser he felt it would be inappropriate. The paradox of Pietro: an old fashioned type catapulted into the future!

Warm regards,

Marcella